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The Representation of History in Digital Media and Its Influence on Collective Memory

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Abstract

This paper discusses the effect that the representation of history in digital media has on collective memory with a particular emphasis on its consequences in the sphere of management. In the digital era, history is no longer limited to a textbook, all the archives or institutional accounts; it is being spread globally by the social media and video-sharing sites as well as web communities, where the history is reinterpreted, challenged, and co-created. This study employs the use of a qualitative methodology to research various participants based on their interviews to examine the way audiences interact with digital historical material, how they engage in negotiating meaning, and how the interactions influence the overall formation of common sense about the past. These results indicate that digital media will render history more convenient and personal to experience, especially among younger viewers, yet may also lead to the dissection or watering down of narratives. The interpretations of the audience are also influenced by the active involvement of online dialogue, which gives rise to collective memory due to the interaction, debate, and exchange of other views. Notably, the research indicates that the digital media strengthens national identity and at the same time creates space on which the challenged and plural memory can emerge to challenge institutional authority. On the managerial side, the implications of these dynamics are significant: historical narratives can be seen as strategic assets that can be used to affect the organizational legitimacy, identity construction and accountability. Organizations are no longer able to use one direction storytelling but need to dialogically interact with the various accounts of the past to continue to maintain trust and relevance. Finally, the study will help in understanding further the complexity of digital media, history and collective memory entanglement and provide information on how managers and institutions can negotiate across this shifting landscape in a responsible and strategic way.

Introduction

The emergence of digital media has radically altered the forms of history representation, consumption, and memory of modern societies. Although the conventional historical discourse was being dominated by academic historians, state institutions, and printed school textbooks, the digital age has created possibilities of constructing and spreading historical knowledge in new ways. YouTube, Instagram, Tik Tok, digital news portals, and a variety of other online platforms became the space where the historical events are perceived, visualized, and conveyed to the masses (Maesschalck, 2022; Pesch & van Uffelen, 2024; Mascarenhas et al., 2024). This change has not just democratized access to historical accounts but has also transformed the

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relationships of collective memory by allowing audiences to engage, re-write and even challenge official accounts of the past (El Nossery, 2023). The change is even more important in Indonesia as each of the nations has a rather complicated historical path and a variety of cultural memory. Since the era of colonial domination and the national revolution, the Reformasi movement in 1998, and the tragedies of 19651966, historical memory has been a disputable issue, politicized and entrenched in the identity-making process (Marchese & Tortola, 2024). The digital media has become an increasingly important part of how these histories are being remembered, particularly among younger generations that possess more access to online information than to analog archives or printed stories (Dulić, 2021). Consequently, history within digital media does not only mirror current memory politics, but it gives rise to novel kinds of remembering forgetting.

Collective memory is theorized to be the common modulus that is made up and maintained through social groups. In contrast to individual memory, collective memory is constructed with the help of communication, institutions and cultural practices. In the digital era, this practice is becoming more mediated by technologies that enable faster flow of images, videos and stories and generate what Arnold & Bischoff (2024) defines as connective memory. Online platforms enable communities to make their own versions of the past, building more open, participatory, and decentralized archives than the hierarchical systems of the traditional historiography. This remodeling casts significant doubts on authority, authenticity and politics of representation in the discourse of history.

Historical representations in digital media are frequently influenced by the narrative strategies which pay more attention to accessibility and emotional involvement than to scholarly accuracy. Complex historical events are often simplified using short videos, memes, and dramatized images to make them more attractive to mainstream audiences (Barclay & Downing, 2023). Although the practice contributes to the growth of interest towards historical matters, it may, also, cause distortion, selective recall, or misinformation (Barclay & Downing, 2023). Digital spaces in Indonesia are now confronted spaces, with arguments over controversial histories, including the anti-communist purges of 19651966 being reconstructed and re framed beyond state-controlled histories (Wardaya, 2021). In these processes, we can see the duality of digital media since it is a democratizing process and a possible location of historical control.

Simultaneously, the digital media helps the communities to recover the histories that were previously marginalized within the official history. Local narratives, oral history, and life experiences can now gain publicity online and establish new dimensions of collective memory (Leong, 2021). Independent efforts by filmmakers, community groups, and social media activists have been significant in rediscovering the lost histories of local heroes, local conflicts and cultural continuity in Indonesia (Danker, 2022). These other histories resist dominant forms and create a more pluralistic memory culture, but they also expose struggles about who gets their own way in the public.

The other dimension is that of the role of interactivity in digital media. Digital platforms make people actively participate in the historical process via comments, shares, and user-created content compared to traditional historical texts. This interactive nature establishes what defines as convergence culture in which audience is not a passive receiver, but a co-producer of historical meaning. Here the collective memory is understood as a living, contentious and an

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ongoing negotiating process. To Indonesian young people, the experience of reading history through digital media is not only about learning the facts but rather about establishing themselves in the context of larger national and cultural identities (Dari et al., 2022). The depiction of history online thus, has practical impacts on societies perception of their past and projection of their futures.

The importance of the study is in its examination of ways in which digital representations of the past shape collective memory in Indonesia. Even though the literature on collective memory and media is rich and thriving in Western settings, fewer studies have explored the convergence between digital platforms and the histories of Indonesia, where the nation has a particularly conflicted and politicized history (Adams, 2024; Ding & Aletta, 2024). Through examination of the way that digital media produces and disseminates historical discourse, this study illuminates the changing dynamic between media, memory, and identity. It also emphasizes the possibilities of digital platforms as a place of reconciliation and contestation where history can not only be recalled, but it is also negotiated in daily practices.

This research would help in understanding the influence of digital media in the formation of collective memory better. It shows that history is no longer an exclusive preserve of historians and official institutions but is becoming progressively co-constructed within dynamic, decentralized and interactive online spaces. This change has far reached consequences on the way people see the past, politics of memory and the development of collective identities in Indonesia and other places. With societies still trying to explore the possibilities and possibilities of the digital world, the issue of how history is represented in these new media spaces is crucial to the preservation of collective memory as inclusive, critical, and responsive to other voices.

Method

A qualitative, descriptive- interpretive design was used in this research to explain the representation of history in digital media and how the representations affect collective memory. Qualitative approach has been selected due to the nature of the phenomena under investigation the meanings, narratives, interpretations and memory formation which can be best approached using rich, contextual, and interpretive data and not numerical measure. The design was informed by the intentional examination of digital phenomena with a mix of the in-depth interviews and group discussions to understand how the producers represented their phenomena and how the audiences interpreted the same. Data analysis and collection were done in an iterative manner; results of the initial content analysis informed interview questions and in turn the storytelling of participants informed subsequent choice of digital materials to be examined in more depth. The process was circular and maintained analytic coherence in that the study was responsive to emergent themes.

Research Environment and Background

The digital environment in which the empirical setting was deployed comprised the effects of digital platforms that are central in historical discourse in modern Indonesia, namely YouTube, Instagram, Tik Tok, and a few national online news sources and community archives websites. The platforms used were dictated by the variety of formats (long-length video, short clips, image text posts, and journalistic articles) in which history is today being represented and consumed. Besides online spaces, interviews and focus group discussions were used within

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urban community environments that were well known to the participants to enable them to have free and reflective discussion. The authors focused on local historical hotspots (e.g. national independence histories, regional heritage histories, and contentious moments like 19651966), though content and participant sampling were focused on variation across region, age, and media habits to represent different memory practices.

Participants and Sampling

To ensure that the interviewees were people who have been exposed to historical content online and that they had varied demographic and experience backgrounds, participants were chosen using purposive and snowball sampling. As inclusion criteria, participants had to be active readers of historical content on at least one of the digital platforms and be interested in how historical content influenced their perceptions about the past. The sampling method was deliberately aimed to create variance in terms of age, education, place of origin and civic engagement to examine variations in interpretation by social positions. The process of data collection was carried out up to the point of thematic saturation, that is, new codes and themes were obtained through new interviews at a relatively lower rate. In the case of groups, two or four focus group discussion forums were arranged each consisting of 4 to 6 participants with similar practices of online activities to bring out vibrancy and shared reflections.

Data Sources

To permit the triangulation of data, this paper incorporated several qualitative data. The purposive sample of digital artifacts (videos, posts, threads, and articles) that were included as primary sources were chosen based on their relevance to the major historical themes that were identified in preliminary scoping. A metadata record of every artifact (platform, date, author/creator type, number of views and number of shares, and visible actions by users) was systematically captured in a content log. The number of secondary data was 10 and 2 to 4 focus group discussions and in depth semi-structured interviews with individual audience members. Furthermore, we gathered observational data by the means of the comment thread and pattern of interaction on the platform to understand the dynamics of conversation and the formation of interpretations. Where possible and relevant, we have used archival sources (e.g. institutional statements, exhibitions of museums online) to place the digital representations within a wider memory space.

Data Collection Procedures

The sampling of content commenced with a scoping exercise in order to determine popular and historically relevant materials in the chosen platforms. Items were registered, stored (downloaded or saved links where allowed) and thematically filtered. The process of participant recruitment was based on community contacts, social media invitation, and snowball referrals; the recruitment communication contained plain language descriptions of the study and contacts. Semi-structured interviews, of a duration of 60-90 minutes, were carried out face-to-face or through a secure video call as participants preferred, and were audio recorded with their consent. Focus groups were about 90 to 120 minutes, were audio taped and accompanied by field notes. Comment overs shot were taken as screen capped photos or text samples. All the recordings have been transcribed word-for-word and where needed translated to the language of analysis, taking care of local idioms and emotional colorations.

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Result and Discussion

The results are organized around three key themes that emerged from the data: the ways history is represented in digital media, how audiences interpret and engage with these representations, and how such interactions influence collective memory. Each theme reflects the complex interplay between digital technology, historical narrative, and social memory formation. The discussion integrates participants' perspectives with relevant theoretical frameworks to provide a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms shape both individual and collective perceptions of history in contemporary Indonesia.

Representation of History in Digital Media

One of the most prominent characteristics of historical representation in digital media is the simplification and dramatization of historical events. Complex political struggles, socio-economic contexts, and long-term historical processes are frequently condensed into short, visually engaging narratives intended to capture online audiences within seconds. Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok encourage this format, as their algorithms prioritize easily consumable content. For example, independence struggles are often represented through iconic images of national heroes and brief storytelling clips that dramatize their bravery while omitting nuanced social or political dynamics. As one participant explained,

> *"When I watch history videos on TikTok, it usually focuses on the hero's courage or sacrifice, but the background of why the war happened or what society looked like at that time is rarely discussed."*

This finding indicates that digital platforms privilege spectacle and emotion over depth, which, while engaging, risks distorting historical understanding. Another recurring pattern is the selective emphasis on national heroes, wars, and cultural heritage. The narratives that dominate digital platforms often align with the state's preferred historical canon, celebrating figures like Sukarno, Diponegoro, and Kartini while leaving out marginalized actors and controversial episodes such as the 1965–1966 violence. This selective emphasis reflects both the cultural pride and political sensitivities embedded in Indonesian history. Participants consistently noted that stories of national heroes are easier to find than accounts of social conflict. One interviewee commented,

> *"I see a lot of videos about Sukarno's speeches or stories about Kartini, but very rarely do I find content about the 1965 tragedy unless it comes from independent creators."*

This suggests that while digital media expands access to historical narratives, it often reproduces existing hierarchies of memory and leaves sensitive histories underrepresented. The third feature observed is the use of visuals, memes, and short videos to make history more accessible to younger audiences. Creators often employ humor, animation, and catchy soundtracks to package history in entertaining ways, increasing its appeal among audiences who might otherwise find textbooks monotonous. For instance, memes juxtaposing historical figures with contemporary cultural references are widely circulated, and dramatized short videos often present key events in humorous or ironic tones. While this technique successfully fosters engagement, it also risks trivializing the historical content. As one participant reflected,

> *"Sometimes I learn about history from memes, and it's funny, but I don't always know if it's accurate. I usually just remember the joke rather than the real story."*

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This tension between accessibility and accuracy highlights the ambivalent role of digital media: it serves as a bridge to historical awareness but can simultaneously dilute the gravity of historical knowledge. Digital platforms not only convey pre-packaged historical narratives but also enable audience participation in shaping representations of the past. Comment sections, hashtags, and user-generated responses create interactive spaces where historical meaning is contested and renegotiated. For example, on YouTube videos about Indonesian independence, audiences frequently debate the contributions of lesser-known figures or highlight regional struggles not mentioned in mainstream accounts. These digital interactions reveal how collective memory is not simply transmitted but actively constructed in dialogue between creators and audiences. As another participant shared,

> *"I often read the comments because sometimes people add more stories or correct the video, and that makes me see different sides of the history."*

Such participatory practices emphasize that in the digital era, representation is no longer a one-way process but a dynamic, collective negotiation of memory.

Audience Interpretations and Engagement

One of the clearest findings of this study is that digital media increases accessibility to history but also produces fragmented or biased understandings. Many participants expressed appreciation for how social media and online platforms made historical narratives easy to access, especially for younger audiences who are less likely to engage with academic texts or official archives. Short videos, animations, and illustrated stories were seen as attractive entry points to learning history. However, this accessibility often comes at the cost of completeness, as fragmented narratives sometimes leave viewers with partial or even distorted versions of the past. One participant reflected,

> *"I like that I can learn history on YouTube in just ten minutes, but sometimes I feel the story is too simple, and I know there must be more behind it that is not explained."*

This statement highlights how the convenience of digital history is simultaneously empowering and limiting, shaping an understanding that is accessible but potentially shallow. A second important theme is that younger audiences relate more strongly to digital narratives than to traditional history textbooks. Interviewees repeatedly contrasted their experiences of learning history in school with their encounters on digital platforms. While formal education was often described as monotonous and rigid, digital media provided stories that felt alive, visual, and relatable. This indicates that the affective and aesthetic appeal of digital history plays a major role in how young audiences construct their understanding of the past. As one student participant noted,

> *"When I was in school, history felt boring because it was only about memorizing years and names. But when I see history explained on Instagram with pictures and videos, I feel more connected to the story."*

Such engagement demonstrates that digital platforms are not just channels of information but vehicles of emotional resonance that make history feel closer to lived experience. The study also found that online communities shape interpretations collectively through comments, shares, and discussions. Digital media does not simply transmit historical content; it fosters dialogue in which users negotiate the meaning of history. In comment sections, audiences often

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debate the accuracy of representations, provide additional historical details, or share personal family memories connected to particular events. These collective exchanges demonstrate how history in the digital age becomes a social practice, shaped not only by content creators but also by the audience's active participation. One participant emphasized this dynamic by saying,

> *"Sometimes the comments section is more interesting than the video itself because people share different versions of the story. I learn a lot from reading what others experienced or heard from their families."*

This highlights the participatory dimension of digital memory, where collective remembrance is built through everyday interactions in online spaces. Audience interpretations are influenced by a sense of skepticism and critical awareness that emerges alongside engagement. While some viewers accept digital history at face value, others recognize its limitations and actively seek alternative sources to cross-check information. This reflects a growing awareness of the potential for bias, selective emphasis, or misinformation in online spaces. One participant shared,

> *"I don't believe everything I see on TikTok about history. I usually compare it with other videos or sometimes search online to see if it's true."*

Such statements suggest that audiences are not passive consumers but critical actors who filter and reinterpret digital representations. The interplay between accessibility, relatability, community interaction, and critical awareness underscores the complexity of audience engagement, showing that digital media does not produce uniform interpretations but rather a spectrum of responses that collectively shape collective memory.

Influence on Collective Memory

The findings reveal that digital media plays a significant role in reinforcing national identity through shared narratives circulated online. Historical content emphasizing national heroes, independence struggles, and cultural heritage creates a sense of unity, particularly when such narratives are widely shared on platforms like YouTube and Instagram. These stories allow audiences to collectively remember key figures and events that symbolize Indonesian identity. One participant described this effect, saying,

> *"When I watch videos about the independence war and see people commenting with pride, I also feel proud to be Indonesian, even though I didn't live through that history."*

This demonstrates how shared digital narratives strengthen collective identity by linking personal emotions to broader national memory. At the same time, digital media introduces opportunities for contested memories to emerge when alternative versions of history are circulated online. Sensitive events such as the 1965–1966 tragedy or the Reformasi movement of 1998 often appear in divergent forms across different digital platforms. Independent creators, activists, and even family members of victims have used social media to publish stories that contradict or complicate official accounts. This plurality of voices creates debates, tensions, and even conflicts in online spaces. As one participant reflected,

> *"I saw a YouTube video about 1965 that told a very different story from what I learned in school. The comments were full of arguments, some people defending the government's version and others supporting the victims' stories."*

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Such exchanges highlight how digital platforms can act as spaces where official memory is challenged, leading to contested interpretations that reshape the collective memory landscape. Another important influence identified in the study is that digital media acts as both a unifying and divisive force in collective memory construction. On one hand, widely circulated narratives of independence and national pride unify audiences across different regions and social groups. On the other hand, debates surrounding controversial episodes generate polarization, with audiences taking sides based on political beliefs, generational perspectives, or personal connections to past events. One participant expressed this ambivalence, noting,

> *"Sometimes I feel connected with others when we all celebrate national heroes online, but other times I feel divided when people argue about history, like during discussions about the New Order period."*

This illustrates that while digital media fosters collective remembrance, it also exposes historical fault lines that can fragment collective identity. Digital platforms facilitate a dynamic and living form of memory that is continuously reconstructed through interaction. Unlike static textbooks or state archives, digital history is flexible, constantly updated, and shaped by the audience's participation. Each new post, comment, or shared video contributes to an evolving narrative of the past. This fluidity reflects a shift from collective memory as a fixed canon to a participatory process in which multiple voices contribute to meaning-making. As one interviewee summarized,

> *"History online never feels finished. Every time I go back to a video or post, I see new comments or different interpretations, and it changes how I think about the event."*

This statement underlines the participatory and iterative nature of digital collective memory, showing how the past in the digital era is never closed but continuously reimagined by communities.

Managerial Implications of Digital Historical Representation

The consequences of this research have shown that the role played by digital media in the creation of historical representation and the collective memory cannot be addressed as simply a cultural phenomenon; rather, it is also a strategic managerial issue within organizations, states, and communities. It is not a novel finding of management scholarship that organizational legitimacy and aligning with stakeholders revolve around storytelling and narratives (Spanuth & Urbano, 2024). The new digital platforms are characterized by a radical decentralization of narrative control in which the historical memory is no longer controlled by institutions but is negotiated in real-time by the audiences, which are dispersed. This discovery reinvents the managerial role in the history-making and implies that managers (in corporations, public institutions, or non-governmental organizations) need to see collective memory as a strategic resource that can be developed, struggled over, and exploited within digital ecosystems (Molecke et al., 2024; Suddaby et al., 2023).

Historically, in this regard, history stops being a background and becomes itself a dynamic resource that organizations can draw on to establish legitimacy, reputation, and identity (Heller, 2023; Keller, 2023). The digital media increases the entrances to these narratives and allows the stakeholders to manipulate the organizational histories by either supporting or opposing them. An example of this is branding research that reveals that corporations often steal

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historical identity as part of the narrative to build loyalty (Keller, 2023; Abd, 2023; Steriopoulos et al., 2024). However, with critical audiences' online invasion, as it happened in this study, organizations can no longer lean on top-down narratives. Rather, they need to operate within the context of managing historical meaning in a collaborative mode, using dialogical approaches that acknowledge the presence of multiple interpretations by the audience. This managerial requirement makes history alive and co-written as it is consistent with the current studies regarding the organizational memory and the sensemaking in networked settings.

It is further managerial implication of the contested nature of historical representation in digital spaces in terms of control and risk management. As alternative historical versions spread and gain popularity on the internet, organizations are becoming increasingly vulnerable to reputational crises, which erode the brand or institutional narratives that organizations have worked hard to create (Tarnoff, 2022; Kaiser et al., 2022; Jain et al., 2021). As an example, companies related to colonial heritage or troubled political rulers are always confronted when digital communities unearth repressed histories. Such dynamics are echoed by the findings of this study as they indicate that online platforms increase the influence of counter-narratives and compel institutions to be further involved with histories they would rather forget. Management-wise, it implies that strategic silence becomes less and less sustainable; active work towards the problematic history is becoming a necessity rather than an option.

The interaction aspect of digital historical engagement underscores the managerial necessity to conceptualize audiences as co-creators of meaning and not passive consumers. This directly affects the stakeholder management and corporate communication strategies. Researchers of participatory culture believe that audiences have the power to re-write stories through sharing, remixing and commenting on digital platforms (Nordin et al., 2023). In the context of management, this is translated into a change towards dialogical models of stakeholder engagement, where a collective memory is co-constructed and constantly negotiated. The fact that the audience is skeptics and critically aware, as evidenced by this study, also shows that organizations have to expect resistance, counter-interpretations, and demands of transparency and incorporate them in their communication strategies instead of diluting them (Bachmann & Valenzuela, 2023).

The collective memory is also of strategic importance to issues related to governance and accountability. Historical narratives that have been integrated into collective memory create time-based legitimacy claims and moral obligations on organizations (Kisa & Kisa, 2024). Digital platforms enhance its speed via the reduction of the time gap between the past and the present that is why stakeholders are able to mobilize history in real-time to call upon accountability. As an example, the movement to hold corporations responsible of environmental harm or exploitation often relies on historical evidence of malpractice to contextualize current demands (Ahmed, 2023).

In this regard, historical representations in the digital form determine better governmental systems, which influence the ethical limits of organizational conduct. The results of the given work confirm this thesis as they demonstrate that challenged digital histories can be translated into the demands of accountability that no longer can be overlooked by organizations. It is also important in terms of leadership and identity work implications in organizations. Historical accounts are frequently utilized by leaders to create visions, legitimize power, and prompt some

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form of collective commitment (Jimenez, 2021). However, when history is rewritten in digital venues, leadership stories are open to reinterpretations and opposition. This makes leaders resort to reflexive positions on historical narration, which acknowledge their partial and contingent authority over the past (Msweli, 2023; Freistein et al., 2024). This, in effect, implies that leaders not only have to communicate history, but also to explore its digital reinterpretations, which implies an open dialogue between the institutional memory and collective digital memory. Otherwise, there is a danger of a gap between the organizational identity assertions and the perceptions of the stakeholders.

Theoretically, the findings expand the body of knowledge on organizational memory by combining these findings with those of the digital media studies and collective memory research. Traditional approaches tend to think of organizational memory as a store of information that is retained and accessed by actors. Additionally, more recent methods view memory as socially created and structurally arranged into narratives (Sen et al., 2023; Decker et al., 2021). The contribution that this paper offers is that there is a mediation of organizational and collective memories by digital platforms, in which the characteristics of fluidity, multiplicity, and contestation are the rule. This forces management scholars to reconsider memory as not stable but as a dynamic interaction, which reflects the demand of increasingly processual and practice-based conceptualizations of memory.

The practical implications of managerial implications of this study are also forward looking. In a world, in which history is mediated more and more by digital technologies, managers should be aware that the past is never closed but can always be rewritten. It demands new historical literacy, digital, and stakeholder conversation skills. It also requires the formalization of the practices that consider collective memory a living resource, which should not be managed by controlling it but responding and being inclusive (Orianne & Eustache, 2023; Feola et al., 2023). It all ends up proving that history when put through digital channels is not just a mirror image in the past but a tactical sphere of management that forms legitimacy, identity and accountability in significant manners.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the digitalization of history radically alters the collective memory by making past a dynamic, contested and participatory source with extensive managerial consequences. Instead of a fixed story managed by institutions, history in the digital era turns out to be a mobile and collaborative form, moderated by the exchanges of content producers, consumers and online communities. To managers, this translates to the fact that historical narratives are no longer marginal to questions of legitimacy, identity and accountability. The results demonstrate that organizations need to go beyond the top-down narrative and adopt approaches that are both critical and dialogical of multiple interpretations of the past, which is both unifying and divisive with the power of digital history. By so doing, the managers do not only protect the image of the organization; they also utilize collective memory as a strategic resource, which places them in a responsible position in the world where digital technologies constantly transform the way societies recollect, argue, and organize history.

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